

LOURDES

Revelation of Heaven

Lourdes 1858-2018



- Timeline of the Apparitions of Our Lady
- Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Maximilian Kolbe
- The Meaning of Lourdes
- Life of St. Bernadette



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The Most Holy Virgin Mary is not a fairy tale or a legend, but a living being who loves each one of us. Yet, she is not sufficiently known, and her love is not reciprocated enough. Accordingly, it is necessary to announce her loving work everywhere.

*St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe
Niepokalanów, on the 16th of February 1940*

Father Karl Stehlin

Lourdes — Revelation of Heaven

The apparitions of the Mother of God in Lourdes took place at a time when freemasonry was spreading its perfidious and pernicious ideology about paradise on earth and the boundless happiness of man here and now. Indeed, all human life is determined by the goal that man sets for himself. The goal and the means to achieve it, as presented by the present liberal and materialistic mentality, is not only a cruel lie and deception and thus a waste of human life, but it increasingly diverts us from the real purpose for which we are created. The final deviation from this goal at the moment of death results in eternal damnation.

This threat is so menacing for so many souls that God in His mercy reaches for special means to save them from the worst catastrophe: He sends the Immaculata to this world, who, as the most loving mother, does everything for her lost children. At Lourdes, she especially reminds us of the purpose for which we were created. Lourdes is the revelation of the mystery of Heaven.

Our Lady explains the existence, essence and greatness of Heaven in two ways:

Firstly, through her own words about eternity and also by the reaction of the visionary St. Bernadette: "I promise to make you happy, however not in this life, but in the next!" Bernadette held on to this promise of eternal happiness throughout her entire life, especially during the most painful hours. In the tortures of her last illness one could hear from her lips: "**Heaven! Heaven!**"

It is said that there are saints who did not go straight to Heaven because they did not have enough thirst for Him. It does not concern me." She wrote in her diary: "I will do everything for Heaven... there I will find my Mother again in all her glory and happiness".

Secondly, by revealing herself in heavenly beauty and glory. H. Laserre, who was the first to describe the events of Lourdes with the approval of the authorities of the Church, wrote: "Bernadette was not able to compare the brightness around her with any known light. It was a brightness stronger than the sun. And yet this powerful light did not hurt her eyes. On the contrary: it was as if it caressed the eyes, it was soothing and an attraction in itself, spreading around a blissful, sweet peace. It differed from ordinary human figures, in that this light broke from her and she was beautiful... so extraordinarily, so wonderfully, so differently beautiful, that even if Bernadette were a perfect painter and she could paint her features with the utmost accuracy, she would not be able to paint this beauty with any brush.

Bernadette saw a slender figure of average height. She seemed to be altogether young, perhaps around twenty-years old. But like her beauty, so too was her youth something extraordinary.

It seemed to be such a youth that does not fade and cannot fade: eternal youth. And there was something else in her youth that could not be expressed in words. It was a combination of the almost child-like grace of the purest virgin with the serious, infinitely understanding, boundless goodness of the mother and the overwhelming majesty of the queen."

This great heavenly happiness which emanates from the immaculate revelation is illustrated in the miraculous conversion of Count de Bruissard when he met Bernadette several months after the apparition.

At the end of the conversation he asked:

— "How did this beautiful lady smile?"

— "Oh Sir, you have to be from Heaven to repeat such a smile".

"Could you not show me how she smiled? I am an unbeliever and I do not believe in revelation."

— "Do you think I am a liar?"

He already wanted to apologize to her as she continued:

— "Because you are a sinner, I will repeat the smile of the Mother of God."

And the Count continued: "The child stood up slowly, folded her hands and smiled as wonderfully as I had never seen on human lips. Then her eyes turned to Heaven. I stood motionless in front of her, convinced that I had seen the smile of the Blessed Virgin on the visionary's face. From then on, I carry this divine souvenir in my heart. I lost my wife and my two children, but I'm no longer alone in the world. I live with the smile of the Blessed Virgin."

In her, the dogma of Heaven becomes visible: Heaven is immaculate without stain. Only that soul which is completely cleansed of all dirt and darkness, entirely pure and immaculate,

enters Heaven. Her face turned to Heaven, her delight and happiness show us that the essential happiness in Heaven is to see God face to face, and thus we love Him with His own unlimited Love. Happiness in Heaven is participation in the infinite happiness of God Himself.

We say in the Credo: *ET ITERUM VENTURUS EST CUM GLORIA JUDICARE VIVOS ET MORTUOS*. We believe in the Lord's final triumphant return at the end of human history. However, there are no analogies that can be used to help explain or even imagine this great event. That is why it is almost unrealistic and abstract for us. One historical event alone gives us an idea of the greatness of this great day: the Ascension of Christ! The angels explain this to the apostles: *sic veniet* — He will come again exactly as you saw Him go. However, there is a picture of this coming in triumph that will gather the whole world at His feet: this is the revelation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mysterious coming of Heaven to us, the first rays of eternal bliss in our darkness: the announcement of the Glorious Return of Christ and preparing us for this Day. Was his first coming not through her? So the second shall be!

She appears on earth only to prepare His coming. As the best of Mothers she prepares our hearts, she puts into us the best dispositions but also makes us understand who HE really is, who will come to judge the living and the dead. Christ in His glory, Christ glorious in His members by glorifying their souls and raising their bodies. This glory of Christ, as we see Him at the moment of the Transfiguration, Resurrection, and Ascension, already now becomes somehow visible on earth, when in her apparitions she reveals something of her glory and heavenly beauty.

As HE will come in His glory, she is already revealing in herself this glory.

As HE will reveal Himself with the fruits of the work of salvation, the triumphant Church, she is already gathering the members of the Militant Church and giving them a foretaste of Heaven.

As He will complete the work of sanctifying every soul to holiness, she is already bestowing graces of conversion and sanctification to her beloved children and leading them on the path to holiness.

As HE will raise the bodies of the deceased to the glory of Heaven, she is already relieving those who are sick in body and soul. How does she do it? Through her triumph over darkness, over Satan and sin. In the world where sin reigns, her IMMACULATE CONCEPTION provides us with the triumph of grace over sin and the power to regain its original innocence. In a world where death prevails, her heavenly and immortal body assures us that Christ's life and love are stronger than death.

The morning star, the star of the sea, receives all its light from the shining sun. Mary receives all her light from Christ. But this star shines in the night and dispels the darkness of despair and doubt. In a world that is looking for human happiness only in man himself and his power to transform the world into an earthly paradise, she reveals the splendour of true happiness and the heavenly paradise in Christ. In her, we contemplate all the goods we can expect: she raises our faith, strengthens our hope, sustains us at each step of our journey to the Divine Spouse who will "come soon". She renews in our hearts the desire for Heaven, the desire for Christ and His victory.



Who has never heard about the apparitions of the Immaculata in Lourdes, the authenticity of which is attested by many miracles?

On that occasion the Immaculata recommended two things to us all: the recitation of the Rosary and penance.

*St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe
Grodno, before February 1924*

Timeline of the Apparitions of Our Lady in Lourdes

From the 11th of February to the 16th of July 1858, in the grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes (France), Our Lady appeared to a 14-year old girl, Bernadette Soubirous.

The First Apparition On Thursday the 11th of February 1858

After dinner on the Thursday before Ash Wednesday, Bernadette's mother told her children that there was no more wood in the house. Bernadette and her sister, Toinette, and a neighbour friend, Jeanne Abadie, went to the river Gave to gather wood. They had to cross a canal of cold water. Fearing that she would have an asthma attack, Bernadette stayed on the bank, and the other two girls crossed the stream and picked up wood under the grotto until they disappeared along the Gave. Bernadette heard a great noise like the sound of a storm, but nothing was moving. She was

frightened and stood straight up, losing all power of speech and thought. She turned her head towards the Grotto of Massabielle and saw in the opening of the rock a single rosebush, moving as if it were very windy.

Almost at the same time, there came out of the interior of the grotto a golden-coloured cloud, and soon afterwards, a Lady,
**young and beautiful — exceedingly beautiful, the likes of
whom she had never seen,**

came and placed herself at the entrance of the opening above the rosebush. She looked at Bernadette and immediately smiled and signalled her to advance, in a way that a mother motions her child to come near. Bernadette took out her rosary and knelt before the Lady, who also had a rosary on her right arm. When Bernadette tried to begin saying the rosary by making the sign of the cross, her arm was paralyzed. It was only after the Lady had made the sign of the cross herself that Bernadette was able to do the same. As Bernadette prayed the rosary, the Lady passed the beads of her rosary between her fingers, but remained silent. She did recite the Glorias with her, however. When the recitation of the rosary was finished, the Lady returned to the interior of the rock and the golden cloud disappeared with her.

Bernadette told her sister of the extraordinary things that had happened to her at the grotto, asking her to keep it a secret. Throughout the day the image of the Lady remained in her mind. In the evening at the family prayer Bernadette was troubled and began to cry. When her mother asked what the matter was, her sister told her everything. Bernadette's mother told her that these were illusions, and forbade her to return to Massabielle.

Bernadette could not sleep that night. The face of the Lady, so good and so gracious, returned incessantly to her memory. It was useless to recall what her mother had said because she did not believe that she had been deceived. Her conviction of this was un-

shakeable. She went on to describe the Beautiful Lady in detail: "She has the appearance of a young girl of sixteen or seventeen. She is dressed in a white robe, girdled at the waist with a blue ribbon which flows down all around it. A yoke closes it in graceful pleats at the base of the neck. The sleeves are long and tight-fitting. She wears upon her head a veil which is also white. This veil gives just a glimpse of her hair and then falls down at the back below her waist. Her feet are bare but covered by the last folds of her robe except at the point where a yellow rose shines upon each of them. She holds on her right arm a rosary of white beads with a chain of gold shinning like the two roses on her feet."

On Sunday, Bernadette's mother allowed her to return to the grotto.

The Second Apparition

On Sunday the 14th of February 1858

The three little girls started out, armed with a vial of holy water. If what their elders said was true, they might need this to ward off malign influences. Instead of throwing the water at the Lady, Bernadette poured the water quietly on the ground. Then she turned and told her companion that, judging by the Beautiful Lady's smile, she was pleased by this action. Before Jeanne Abadie, who was just arriving, could explain that she had thrown a stone for fun, the others had scattered in every direction, screaming for help as they ran. When Toinette reached the *cachot* (home) and poured out her story, her mother seized a baton and headed for the site. By now the whole town was talking. Fortunately for the unhappy little Bernadette, one local woman of considerable prominence interpreted the apparitions in a different light from most of the townspeople. She got Louise's permission to let her daughter Bernadette accompany her and a friend to the grotto.

The Third Apparition

On Thursday the 18th of February 1858

All three went first to early Mass. Then they set out for the grotto. Madame Millet carried a blessed candle; Antoinette Peyret a pen, paper and ink to record anything that might be said. The Beautiful Lady said to Bernadette: "There is no need for me to write down what I have to say to you. Will you be so kind as to come here every day for fifteen days?" No explicit reason was given for this request, but a definite pledge accompanied it: though she did not promise that Bernadette would be happy in the world, the Beautiful Lady gave her word that happiness would be waiting in Heaven.

The Fourth Apparition

On Friday the 19th of February 1858

Bernadette's parents and her aunt accompanied her to the Grotto along with some neighbours. Shortly after Bernadette began to pray the Rosary, everyone present noticed that her face was transfigured and illuminated.

The Fifth Apparition

On Saturday the 20th of February 1858

On her fifth visit, the Beautiful Lady taught Bernadette a prayer, which she recited daily for the rest of her life. She never revealed the prayer to anyone, but she did say that she was told to always bring a blessed candle with her. Candles now burn perpetually at the Shrine.

The Sixth Apparition

On Sunday the 21st of February 1858

The Beautiful Lady told Bernadette on this occasion to "pray for sinners", which she never failed to do. Several hundred people

were present on that day, including Dr. Dozous, a prominent physician in Lourdes. He told the crowd that he could find nothing abnormal about Bernadette's physical condition, even when her mental state was trancelike: "Her pulse was regular, her respiration easy, and nothing indicated nervous excitement."

A meeting was called by the citizens of the town, and sharp differences of opinion were expressed regarding the apparitions. They expressed concern for the dangers that could accompany gatherings of such large crowds. They persuaded the Procurer Imperial, M. Dutour, to officially forbid Bernadette to return to the Grotto. Bernadette responded that she could not give her word to refrain from going to the Grotto because she had promised the Beautiful Lady she would do so. Dutour dismissed her, and discussed this matter with two local officials: M. Jacomet, the Chief of Police; and M. Estrade, who was to become Bernadette's and Dutour's friend and who was also to perform an invaluable service by listening in at future conversations and scrupulously recording them word for word. Estrade recorded a conversation between the Chief of Police and Bernadette. During that meeting, M. Jacomet deliberately tried to confuse Bernadette to make her change her account of the apparitions. When that attempt failed, the Chief of Police released Bernadette to the custody of her father with an admonition that he take her home and guarantee that there would be no further disturbances. But the interior call which was urging her on was stronger than any earthly admonition.

On Monday the 22nd of February 1858, Bernadette returned to the Grotto after school. Two policemen saw her and followed her, and so did the usual crowd. The policemen stood at respectful attention as she knelt down in her accustomed place. But as she arose, they sprang forward and asked her if she still insisted that she had seen a Beautiful Lady. "No, this time I saw nothing at all,"

she answered. She was allowed to go home, but she was taunted and threatened. People said mockingly that the Beautiful Lady was afraid of the police and had found some safer place to go.

The Seventh Apparition

On Tuesday the 23rd of February 1858

Approximately two hundred people were present at this apparition. When Bernadette's appearance was once more transformed, the men present removed their hats and fell to their knees. Bernadette appeared to be gravely serious and listening, and then joyful, and she would occasionally bow low. At the conclusion of the vision, which lasted an hour, Bernadette moved on her knees toward the rose bush and kissed the ground. When asked what the Lady had said, Bernadette replied that the Lady had entrusted her with three secrets, which she never revealed.

The Eighth Apparition

On Wednesday the 24th of February 1858

During the eighth apparition, Bernadette turned and faced the crowd of more than four hundred people, and three times she repeated, "penance, penance, penance!"

The Ninth Apparition

On Thursday the 25th of February 1858

During this apparition, the Beautiful Lady told Bernadette to, "drink from the fountain and bathe in it." Bernadette was puzzled; there had never been a fountain at Massabieille, or any kind of a natural spring. She began to scratch the loose gravel off the ground which encircled her. As she did so, she noticed that the ground beneath her was moist, and that a little pool was forming and bubbles were rising from it. She cupped her

hands together and drank, and then washed her face. The next day, the pool was overflowing and water was dripping down over the rock. The following day, the trickle had become a real stream. Of course, it was immediately said — and has been said by sceptics ever since — that the spring was there all the time. The fact remains that Bernadette did find the spring as the result of a direct command.

The Tenth Apparition

On Saturday the 27th of February 1858

On this occasion, the Beautiful Lady told Bernadette to "kiss the ground on behalf of sinners." She immediately did so, and the crowd followed her example.

The Eleventh Apparition

On Sunday the 28th of February 1858

There were approximately two thousand spectators at the Grotto that morning. The Lady asked Bernadette to tell the clergy to build a chapel on the site of the Grotto.

The Twelfth Apparition

On Monday the 1st of March 1858

During this apparition, the Lady commented to Bernadette that she was not using her own Rosary, which was an accurate statement. Bernadette had been asked by Pauline Sans to use Pauline's Rosary at the Grotto that day.

The Thirteenth Apparition

On Tuesday the 2nd of March 1858

Bernadette arrived at the Grotto early in the morning, and prayed the Rosary in the presence of the Lady, who remained silent except for the Glorias.

The Fourteenth Apparition

On Wednesday the 3rd of March 1858

During this apparition, the Lady repeated that she wanted a chapel built by the clergy and, additionally, that she wanted people to come to this chapel in processional form. Bernadette was terribly afraid of the parish priest, Abbé Peyramale. It had been difficult for her to go to him the first time about building a chapel, but it took a great deal of courage for her to present herself to him a second time about processions. He dismissed her curtly, ordering her to tell the Beautiful Lady that the Curé of Lourdes was not in the habit of dealing with mysterious strangers; that if she wanted a chapel — if she had a right to one — she must reveal Her identity.

The Fifteenth Apparition

On Thursday the 4th of March 1858

By now, almost everyone in France knew that March 4th was the last of the fifteen days that Bernadette had promised the Lady that she would be present at the Grotto. Twenty thousand people were present that day, including an entire military garrison in full-dress uniform. As Bernadette approached the apparition site, a path was cleared for her, and the soldiers who accompanied her did so with respect. After the apparition, Bernadette told the crowd that she would continue coming to the Grotto because the Beautiful Lady had said nothing in the form of a farewell. The crowd was disappointed and disillusioned. They had seen Bernadette transfigured with a strange radiance, but they had hoped to also share her vision, to hear the same voice that she did, and they expected that, at the very least, the rosebush would burst into a sudden miraculous bloom.

The Sixteenth Apparition **On Thursday the 25th of March 1858**

During the sixteenth apparition, which occurred on the Feast of the Annunciation, the Beautiful Lady revealed her identity to Bernadette:

**"Que soy era Immaculado Concepcion",
I am the Immaculate Conception.**

Bernadette was not sure what this name meant, but people who needed no explanation flocked to Lourdes in greater numbers than ever before. Baron Massy, a local official, ordered Bernadette to be examined by three more physicians. They found her to be physically and mentally sound.

The Seventeenth Apparition **On Wednesday the 7th of April 1858**

Bernadette had never failed to bring a lighted candle to the Grotto since the first time she had been instructed to do so by the Beautiful Lady. During this apparition, she unconsciously placed one of her hands over the flame of the candle. People witnessed the flame burning through her fingers. Bernadette did not even hear the cries of horror which arose from the crowd. She continued to pray for at least fifteen minutes while the flame burned through her hand. She emerged quietly from prayer unscathed. Then Dr. Dozous took another candle and, without warning, touched the flame to her hand. Bernadette immediately cried out in pain. Shortly after this apparition, the Prefect took matters into his own hands and ordered the Grotto closed, and the rustic altar was dismantled.

The Eighteenth Apparition On Friday the 16th of July 1858

Bernadette seemed relieved that she was becoming less of a public figure. Several months had passed, and after receiving communion on the feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, Bernadette felt an irresistible urge to return to the Grotto. Since the barricade was still in place, she and her aunt could not get as close to the sacred spot as they wanted, so they knelt in the grass, and the Beautiful Lady appeared to her one last time.



Above: The Society of St. Pius X celebrated the centenary of the death of its patron saint with an international pilgrimage at Lourdes in 2014.

Photo on next page: The grotto built by St. Maximilian with brothers in Mugenzai no Sono (Garden of the Immaculata) in Nagasaki after the grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes.



The grotto of Lourdes in Mugenzai no Sono
attracts many souls to the heart of the common
Mother of all men, the Immaculata.

*St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe
Niepokalanów, on the 10th of September 1940*

Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Maximilian Kolbe

Saint Maximilian venerated Our Lady with the name she herself proclaimed in Lourdes: "I am the Immaculate Conception".

The life and works of Saint Maximilian were inseparable from the Immaculata and her name.

The 11th of February, which is the annual memorial of the apparitions of the Mother of God in Lourdes, was celebrated by Saint Maximilian with great devotion. Before this feast the Saint, together with his brothers, was in the habit of saying a novena. The octave (the 7 days following the feast) was also the time of the bestowing of wonderful graces by the Immaculata, as well as a time of special commitment to the fight for the Kingdom of God. Often on that feast the Immaculata would bestow special temporal (for example important matters of the apostolate) and spiritual graces on Saint Maximilian.

The whole of February, the month that commemorates Our Lady's apparitions in Lourdes, was always regarded as a blessed month by Saint Maximilian: "The blessed month of February has come again. I say blessed, because every year on the 11th of February we celebrate the memory of the apparition of the Immaculate Virgin at Lourdes."

For Knights of the Immaculata, the 11th of February is always a very special day. Saint Maximilian encouraged all Knights of the Militia Immaculatae to celebrate this feast worthily, by receiving Holy Communion and giving themselves more wholeheartedly to the Immaculata, mainly through the battling with evil, having limitless trust in God and Mary, as well as meditating on her and reciting the rosary.

On the 12th of January 1933, a month before the feast, he encouraged everyone to make proper preparations for the celebration of the 75th commemoration of the apparitions of the Immaculata in Lourdes: "It is almost a whole month to the feast of the apparition of the Immaculata in Lourdes on the 11th of February. It is necessary to prepare oneself so as to receive as many graces as possible. How should one do this? By becoming more and more her property; firstly until the feast of the apparition of the Immaculata in Lourdes, and then throughout the whole year, working on belonging to her more and more, because she has prepared special graces."

This sentence contains two very important elements: In the *first element*, St. Maximilian calls for good preparations for the coming of the jubilee. This preparation should consist primarily in experiencing and putting into practice our total abandonment to the Immaculata, while striving for even greater perfection in our daily lives.

The *second element* is the clear anticipation of the special graces (or one great grace) that Mary can obtain for her Knights during this jubilee year. On the jubilee day, namely the 11th of February 1933, Saint Maximilian wrote two letters to Niepokalanów (the City of the Immaculata). In those letters he gave testimony to the saving of a young Japanese girl from suicide, as well as a few conversions of Japanese people who received the sacrament of baptism.

He wholeheartedly appealed for the reception of the words of the Immaculata from Lourdes, the development of the Militia Immaculatae movement and taking the Immaculata as the model of life for every Knight.

In 1940 St. Maximilian wrote: "In Lourdes the Immaculata urged everyone to pray for sinners. And the M.I. fulfils this invitation of the Immaculata, by having thousands of mouths and hearts repeat daily: '**O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee, and for all those who do not have recourse to thee, especially for the Freemasons and for those who are commended to thy care**'.

This invocation came out the mouth of the Immaculata and applies to every soul."

In Lourdes, the Immaculate Virgin exhorted all people to do penance. In addition, during these apparitions, as if to show us a source of help, she recited the 'Hail Mary'¹. Since then, in Lourdes the Immaculata began to fulfil the office of Mediatrix for us: she invites the sick, gathers the lame and the weak to heal them, and helps us understand how much we depend on her in our natural life.

¹ The visionary of Lourdes, St. Bernadette Soubirous, claimed that the Virgin "passed the beads of her Rosary between her fingers but she said nothing. Only at the end decade did she recite with me: *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto*"; cf KW 1316.

She lovingly attracts those who are sick in the soul, that is, unbelievers and sinners with an obstinate heart, and instils supernatural life in their hearts, to convince them of the power that she has to give us supernatural life.

Moreover, we should note above all that Jesus works miracles in the place (Lourdes) chosen by His Mother.

Everything that the Blessed Virgin Mary does at Lourdes testifies to the truth of the words of St. Peter Damian: 'A curse came upon the earth through a woman; through a woman earth's blessing is restored.' And also the words of St. Augustine: 'In man's deception, poison was served him through a woman; in his redemption, salvation is presented him through a woman.'

Therefore what St. Bernard expresses in words, the Immaculate Virgin confirms by acts: 'Such is the desire of Him who willed that we should have everything through Mary.'"

Writing about the apparitions in Lourdes, the then Father Kolbe stressed the role and mission of Saint Bernadette Soubirous. **Saint Maximilian gave her as an example of somebody completely devoted to Mary and capable of suffering enormously for God and our Heavenly Mother.**

Saint Maximilian upheld Saint Bernadette as an exemplar for the Knights of the Immaculata.

In 1914, as a clerical student Saint Maximilian was miraculously cured by means of water from Lourdes. To have lost his right thumb could have prevented him from receiving priestly orders. His miraculous cure was a visible sign of Mary's care of his priestly vocation.

During his life Saint Maximilian Kolbe visited Lourdes only once. It was on the 30th of January 1930, before undertaking his

mission to the Far East. In Lourdes Saint Maximilian celebrated the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the Basilica, he prayed the rosary in the Grotto, he drank the miraculous water and he sank his finger in the water, he kissed the rock in the Grotto and he commended his prayers to Mary. Summarising his visit to Lourdes, he stressed the experience of a great love of His "Mamusia (Mammy)", as he fondly called the Immaculata.

The apparitions in Lourdes had a special place in the Marian treaty begun by Father Maximilian (which he never completed). The Saint gave a description of the apparitions. However, most of all, St. Maximilian discussed the meaning of the name 'Immaculate Conception': "The Immaculate Conception — this privilege must be particularly dear to her if, at Lourdes, this is how she herself wanted to be called: I am the Immaculate Conception. These words must indicate accurately and in the most essential manner who she is."

"Immaculate Conception" — these words came out of the mouth of the Immaculata herself. Therefore, they must indicate accurately and in the most essential manner who she is. Who are you, O Immaculate Conception? Not God, for He has no beginning; not an angel, created directly out of nothing; not Adam, formed with the mud of the earth; not Eve, taken from Adam; and not even the Incarnate Word, who existed from eternity and is 'conceived' rather than a 'conception'. Prior to conception, the children of Eve did not exist, so they may be better called 'conception'. Yet you differ from them also, for they are conceptions contaminated by original sin, while you are the only Immaculate Conception."

Also, in Lourdes, the Immaculata did not define herself as 'Conceived without sin', but, as St. Bernadette herself recounts:

"At that moment the Lady was standing above the wild rose bush in the same way in which she is depicted on the Miraculous Medal. Upon my third question her face took on an expression of gravity and at the same time of profound humility... Joining the palms of her hands as if in prayer, she lifted them up to her chest... turned her gaze toward Heaven... then, slowly opening her hands and bowing to me, she said in a voice in which you could notice a slight tremor: 'Que soy era Immaculada Councepsiou!' (I am the Immaculate Conception!)".

The whole meaning of the life, sufferings and death of Saint Maximilian was to underline the answer given by the Most Holy Virgin Mary to Bernadette, when she asked the Lady to reveal her name. Saint Maximilian had a desire to live by that answer as well as to feed others with it. Countless times and without rest Saint Maximilian repeated: "The Most Holy Mother, asked by Bernadette what her name was, replied: 'I am the Immaculate Conception'. This is a definition of the Immaculata."





In her apparition at Lourdes, in 1858, the Mother of God held in her arms the rosary, and through Bernadette, recommended to us the recital of the Rosary. We can conclude, therefore, that the prayer of the Rosary makes the Immaculata happy.

*St. Maximilian Maria Kolbe
Mugenai no Sono, before October 1933*

Father C.B. Daly

The Meaning of Lourdes

While Lourdes and its apparitions add nothing to the Church's dogmas, they do deepen our appreciation of her teachings and enliven our response to them. The need for prayer and penance, an awareness of Jesus truly present in the Eucharist, the duty of fraternal charity — all this has ever been part of Christian life. At Lourdes, however, we are confronted with these things anew. Mary there shows us their importance as a mother would, by making them more actual, one might even say tangible. By bringing us face to face with human weakness and misery in the pilgrims who come to that shrine, she pleads that we make prayer and penance, love of Jesus and charity for others the very fabric of our daily existence. It is here that she lets us see the significance of her Immaculate Conception and know the extent of her Co-redemption. The first privilege kept her free from sin and therefore empowered her to love both God and man perfectly. The other gave her the responsibility to aid us,

her children, in working towards that same freedom and attaining that same love. Mary's concern at Lourdes is, then, to help us bear witness to the realities that lie hidden in the truths of faith.



Lourdes and Revelation

In investigating the meaning of Lourdes, one has to begin by eliminating some mistaken hypotheses. We know, for example, from general theological principles, that Lourdes cannot be intended to teach us any new truth about Mary or about the divine plan of salvation. No apparition or private revelation, however approved by the Church, could reveal to us any new truth of faith or morals, or add any truth to what is to be believed by Catholic faith. Pope Benedict XIV, as Cardinal Lambertini, in his classic work on "The Beatification and Canonization of the Servants of God", says, speaking of private revelations:

Such an ecclesiastical approbation is nothing else than a permission to publish (a narrative) after mature examination, in view of the instruction and utility of the faithful... The assent of Catholic Faith to revelations thus approved is not merely not obligatory, but is not possible; (such revelations) demand only an assent of human credence in conformance with the rules of human prudence which represents them as probable and piously credible.¹

Jean Guitton, speaking of mariophanies and places of Marian pilgrimage, has well said:

The veneration of the faithful is not directed to the place itself, but to the mystery that is conceived to be connected with the place... It may happen that the seer of the vision is canonized; if so, it is not for his visions alone, but for the heroic virtues of his life... Suppose the worst: imagine facts come to light which throw serious doubt on the genuineness of the vision... That would take nothing at all from the truths this particular vision represented. These would not depend on any new vision; the Church already possessed them in her deposit of faith. Nor would it detract from the graces received where the vision occurred.

These statements only repeat fundamental theses of the theology of faith and of revelation. In their light it is evident that it is only with qualifications that we can speak of Lourdes as having been intended by God as a miraculous confirmation of the truth of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception defined four years

¹ All footnotes can be found in the original booklet by Fr. Daly *The Meaning of Lourdes*, Marian Reprints, University of Dayton, March 1963.

earlier by Pope Pius IX. This is indeed a very natural way to speak and it contains important truth. The episcopal document whereby Mgr. Laurence in 1862 gave official ecclesiastical recognition to the apparition already pointed out that, by appearing at Lourdes, and calling for a sanctuary to be built there, Our Lady seemed herself to have wished "to consecrate by a monument the infallible pronouncement of the successor of St. Peter."

The popes themselves have spoken in this way. Pope St. Pius X, in his encyclical for the fiftieth anniversary of the Definition of 1854, wrote:

Pope Pius IX had hardly defined as of Catholic faith the truth that Mary was from her conception exempt from sin, when there began at Lourdes the marvellous manifestations of Our Lady.

Pope Pius XII in his encyclical for the centenary of Lourdes recalled a statement from his earlier encyclical, *Fulgens Corona*, that

the Blessed Virgin Mary herself wished, it would seem, to confirm by a marvellous event the definition which her Son's Vicar on earth had a short time before proclaimed.

However, the Pope in the same centenary encyclical noted that

The infallible word of the Roman Pontiff, authentic interpreter of revealed truth, needed no heavenly confirmation in order to command the belief of the faithful.

But yet, he continued:

With what emotion and what gratitude the Christian people and its pastors received from the lips of Bernadette the reply coming from Heaven, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

These words of Pope Pius XII are the most accurate expression of the matter. In one sense Lourdes cannot confirm the truth of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, because we are more sure of the truth of the dogma than we are of the reality of the apparitions. For the former we have divine authority; for the latter we have strictly only human credibility. Yet, in the concrete case, these distinctions seem somewhat academic and unreal. Lourdes does not add any new ground of objective certitude to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception; but it does confirm our personal apprehension of that truth.

Perhaps we might use Newman's formula, and say that Lourdes helps to change our attitude towards the dogma from a notional into a real assent. Mary's mission at Lourdes was not to reveal new truths, but to give us a deeper realization of the truths revealed by her Son once and for all time, the truths she kept while on earth and pondered in her heart.

It is, therefore, theologically inexact and inadvisable to speak of Lourdes and the other great Marian manifestations of modern times as marking a new and Marian epoch in the economy of redemption. Preachers sometimes speak of this as the Age of Mary and develop their theme by suggesting that God first sent His Son to draw mankind to His love; and when men refused to come to His Son, He in the last times sends them Mary. Frequently implicated with this theme is another and probably more serious aberration which crept into certain mariological expressions and images since the sixteenth century.

This trend of thought would have it that, as between Jesus and Mary, Mary provides the pity and the pleas to Jesus for mercy, and Jesus the rigour of divine justice and wrath towards sinners. Such language and imagery are, of course, devotional rather than theological, and it is perhaps unfair to assess them by rigorous theological criteria.

Rightly interpreted, the apparitions at Lourdes and a century of Lourdes devotion stand opposed to these aberrant concepts and constitute a recall to the traditional and true theology of Our Lady.



"I am the Immaculate Conception"

It is natural to look for some centre of unity amid the diversity of facts and words associated with Lourdes. There can be no doubt that this centre was provided by Our Lady herself when on the 25th of March 1858 she at last spoke the word that all had been waiting, praying and hoping for. She spoke her name. She said: **"I am the Immaculate Conception."**

Nothing more surely attests to the doctrinal soundness and the supernatural origin of the apparitions than these words. Bernadette did not know what they meant. Her cousin, Jeanne Vedere, who had the story directly from Bernadette at the time, describes how Bernadette had to repeat the words over and over again on her way to tell them to the Curé for fear of forgetting

them; and that when M. Peyramale asked her what the words meant, she confessed that she did not know.

This apparition was always the climax of Bernadette's narration of the events of Massabielle. She accompanied her narration with a re-enactment of the gestures of Our Lady as she spoke the words. Our Lady had had her hands joined, with the Rosary hanging from her right arm. In response to Bernadette's thrice-repeated appeal to her to declare her name she smiled, then extended her arms downwards in the attitude of the Virgin of the Miraculous Medal, so that the Rosary slipped towards her wrist; then joined her hands again upon her breast and with eyes raised towards Heaven, spoke with indescribable humility and tenderness the words, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

Bernadette's repetition of these gestures and words made an unforgettable impression on all who witnessed it. The sculptor, M. Fabisch, who had already executed the statuary of La Salette, and was chosen to make the first statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, came in 1863 to hear from Bernadette herself the description of the Lady of her visions. He asked her to describe the scene of the Lady's self-revelation. He later wrote:

The girl stood up with perfect simplicity. She joined her hands and raised her eyes towards Heaven... But neither Fra Angelico, nor Perugino, nor Raphael has ever created anything so gentle, and at the same time so profound as the look of that little girl... I shall never forget, as long as I live, the beauty of that expression.

There is no doubt, then, that the sixteenth apparition, and Our Lady's words on that occasion, are the heart of Lourdes and the key to its whole meaning. Bernadette herself, who deplored

the fact that too many people skim over the surface of things, remarked: "I would like to see emphasis placed on the apparition in which the Blessed Virgin declared her identity." Everything in the story of Lourdes is related to and made meaningful by the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

The grammar of Our Lady's words is strange and cannot be accidental. The authenticity of the words has been questioned on theological grounds: how could Our Lady be her Immaculate Conception?

But the construction surely invites juxtaposition with two sentences from the New Testament. The first is that in which St. Paul says of Our Lord: "Him who knew no sin (God) hath made sin for us, that we might be made the justice of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). The second is that in which Our Lady herself says, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord"; in other words, "I am the slave of the Lord; I am nothing but the fulfiller of His will."

St. Paul says that God made Christ sin, that we might be made the justice of God in Christ. But in Mary and in her alone the divine plan of redemption is already and fully and finally realized. Through Christ, her Son, she is already made "the justice of God." She is the justice of God accomplished. She is the Immaculate Conception, in whom through Christ sin is totally defeated. Christ was made sin that she might be sinless. Christ was made sin for us; she is made "anti-sin" in order that she may be the model of the sinlessness that we, poor sinners, must painfully, penitentially labour to achieve in Christ.

But Mary's sinlessness is not merely a state which she passively receives. It is also a total, dedicated disposition of will which she actively lives and is. In this sense also she is her Immaculate Conception; that is to say, she is the justice of God; she is the complete fulfiller of all the justice of His just will. "I am

the Immaculate Conception" was Our Lady's repetition, on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1858, of the words she spoke at the Annunciation itself: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to Thy word."



Lourdes and Penance

Historically there is no doubt that penance and prayer for sinners was the essence of Our Lady's message to Bernadette, and through her to our time. On Sunday the 21st of February, which was the first Sunday of Lent, at the sixth apparition, Bernadette herself described how the Lady suddenly looked sad, fixing her gaze beyond Bernadette; and when the child asked her why she was sad, she said: "You will pray to God for sinners."

On Wednesday the 24th of February, Bernadette seemed overcome with a pitiful sorrow, and in her ecstasy rose from her knees, and with joined hands seemed to implore the crowd, saying, "Penance, penance, penance."

On Thursday the 25th of February, Bernadette was to show before a disconcerted and even scandalized crowd what this penance might mean. It was on this day that the Lady ordered her to drink of the spring, which was not yet visible, and Bernadette had to scrape the clay till the water came, and then overcome her natural repugnance to drink the muddy water. She tried three times before she could bring herself to drink it; later she said to some pharisaical critic: "But it was very dirty." Then she was told to eat some grass. Symbolic meaning has been sought for this action, but it is most unlikely that any was intended. It was a humiliating act for Bernadette; its whole meaning was penitential. Penance indeed it was, for when the crowd saw their child of grace, her face soiled with mud, chewing blades of grass, they could not but think that the poor girl was crazed, and they went home dejected, in sad or angry disillusionment.

An important part of the teaching of Lourdes is conveyed by the extreme poverty out of which Our Lady called Bernadette to the vision of her heavenly beauty. Father Laurentin has recently reduced the message of Lourdes to three themes: poverty, prayer, conversion of heart.

He shows how poverty fitted Bernadette to be chosen by Our Lady who in her Magnificat places herself among the humble, the little, the hungry, the weak of the earth. Bernadette's poverty and ignorance, and the fact that the first believers at the grotto were all from "the lower classes," were some of the chief stumbling-blocks to acceptance of the apparitions. There were many who could not help saying: "Is it possible that Our Lady could appear to a little tramp like that?" Lourdes meant an overturning of the values of the world, a confounding of worldly wisdom.

But it was not Bernadette's physical poverty itself which must have endeared her to Our Lady; but rather that she was poor in

spirit, humble of heart. She accepted the verdict of others that she was "good for nothing." She said that Our Lady used her as one might use a brush for sweeping, and then, when she had done with her, put her away again behind the door. Hiddenness, silence, humility were the chief characteristics of her sanctity. They were her way of imitating Mary and carrying out the lessons Mary taught her at the Grotto.

Indeed it has become more and more clearly recognized in recent years that the best commentary on the meaning of Lourdes is the subsequent life of Bernadette. In that life, penance and reparation for sinners are the dominant themes. Father Febvre, chaplain of the Convent of St. Gildard at Nevers, records his very definite conviction that Sister Marie-Bernard had received her mission of living at the Mother House in the instructions given to her from the lips of Mary Immaculate at Lourdes: to do penance, to pray, to mortify herself, to suffer for sinners.

In her personal *carnet intime*, or spiritual note-book, in which she wrote her own thoughts or copied notes from spiritual books or from retreats, she wrote this prayer:

O Mary, Mother of Sorrows, at the foot of the Cross
you received the title of our Mother. I am the child of your
sorrows, the child of Calvary. O Mary, my tender Mother,
here is your child, at the very end of her strength. Have
pity on me. Grant that one day I may be in Heaven with
you... May I stay with you at the foot of the Cross, if such is
the pleasure of your divine Son. May I begin here on earth,
my soul united to your soul, to glorify the Saviour by the
perpetual homage of perfect submission.

The last word of Lourdes is there. For us, as for Bernadette, Lourdes means saying "yes," "fiat," to Mary, with Mary, who is herself "Yes and Amen" to the salvific will of God.



The Immaculate Conception and Sinners

It is only the theology of the Immaculate Conception and of Mary's role as associate of Our Redeemer which will enable us to glimpse the full meaning of Our Lady of Lourdes concern for sinners. Nowhere more than at Lourdes do we experience what Catholic theology teaches, that she is Mother of sinners, Mediatrix of redemption.

Mary's Immaculate Conception was not a personal privilege only but humanity's response, in Mary, to God's offer of grace. Grace is our union in body and soul, mind and heart and will with Christ in God. For us, fallen creatures, it is only by struggle and effort, pain and self-denial, that this union can be effected, against the weight of resistance of our self-opinionated minds and egoistic hearts and defiant wills. How can Our Lady inspire or console us sinners, she who knew not sin nor the wearying drag towards sin of fallen flesh? But Mary's Immaculate

Conception, as it does not exempt Mary from the human condition of needing redemption, so it does not remove her from the human way of achieving union with God's will, in which is salvation and sanctity. Mary, though sinless, accepted pain and sorrow which are the results of sin; accepted them, not for herself but for us sinners. Her union with her Son's suffering for us began with her Son's conception in her womb for us. When Mary said, "Be it done to me according to thy word," she was speaking from a mind, heart and will completely united with her Son, who at that same instant coming into the world said: "Behold I come to do thy Will, O God" (cf. Heb. 10:7).

For Jesus, that Will meant the oblation of His body for us sinners on the Cross. For Mary it would mean standing by the Cross of Jesus, uniting her mind and heart and will with His self-oblation. As we are sons of God, brothers of Christ, through Christ's Blood, so we are sons of Mary through Mary's tears. The Lady who looked in pity and sorrow beyond Bernadette towards the sinners of the world, is the same Lady who looked from Calvary over us all, as Jesus said to her: "Woman, behold thy son." From then on Mary accepted responsibility for sinners, as a mother feels responsible for, anxious about, concerned over, involved with her children. It is a Mother of sinners who said to Bernadette, "You will pray with me for sinners; weep with me for sinners; suffer with me for sinners."

But Mary did not merely suffer for our salvation; she showed us in her life the way to work out our salvation. For us sinners the way of salvation must be primarily penitential; but it would seem that penance could have no place in the personal holiness of Mary. If, however, we reflect on the completed essence of penance we will see that Mary realized it truly, but in a higher way. Penance is above all metanoia, a voluntary, resolved change

of mind, a turning of mind and will away from creatures and a uniting of them wholly, determinedly, with the holy mind and will of God.

The perfection of penance is in faith, which believes God's word and lives by it, despite all that creatures can suggest of doubt or darkness; in hope, which trusts God's faithfulness despite the contrary appearances, the dangers and our weaknesses; in charity, which eagerly and resolutely chooses God and whatever God wants and refuses to be deflected from that choice by any creature. It is by faith, hope and charity that penance, metanoia, is made effective throughout our whole being. The Immaculate Conception is faith, hope and charity completely fulfilled, penance made perfect. In Mary there are no walls separating her from God. As Father Bouyer has said:

The Immaculate Conception is the grace of putting no obstacle to the inflow of grace.



Mary — the Pilgrim

Faith, hope and charity, in imitation of Mary, are the great end and fruit of pilgrimage to Lourdes, as they are the end and purposes of our lives. And is not pilgrimage a picture of our lives on earth? "We have not here a lasting city"; we are on the road towards "one that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). We must confess "that (we) are pilgrims and strangers on the earth" ...for we "desire a better, that is to say, a heavenly country" (Heb. 11:16). The time we have to spend here is short: "it remaineth... (that) they that use this world (should be) as if they used it not: for the fashion of this world passeth away" (1 Cor. 7: 29–31).

St. Paul's praise of the heroes of Israel's faith applies to nobody more than to Mary, through whom at last Israel's long waiting was rewarded and the great promise fulfilled. She more than Abraham "went out, not knowing whither (she) went." She infinitely more than Sara "received strength to conceive a seed ...because she believed that He was faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:8, 11).

It is because Mary was a pilgrim of faith and hope and love that we can come to Lourdes with hope that cannot be confounded. We can "lift up the hands that hang down and the feeble knees"; for "we are come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God... and to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Testament, and to the sprinkling of blood that speaketh better than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:12, 22, 24).



Lourdes and the Sick

Lourdes cannot be thought of without the constant, massive presence of the sick. Lourdes cannot be discussed without reference to its miraculous cures. But at Lourdes sickness is put into its true context, that of its supernatural significance; and miracles are put into their true perspective as signs of the mighty healing power of God's grace. There may be a certain truth in Pascal's sombre words: "Miracles are not sent to convert, but to condemn." Must we not at Lourdes take home to ourselves what Our Lord said in awful warning to "the cities wherein were done the most of his miracles, for that they had not done penance" (Matt. 11:20). For the miracles of Lourdes were surely wrought primarily that we might know that the Son of Man, who can cure men's bodies, has power also to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6).

There is little doubt but that the spring of water, so prominent a feature of Lourdes, is a symbol of cleansing of soul and body from sin and the ravages of sin; a symbol of baptism renewed in faith and penance at Lourdes; a symbol of the renewal of the face of our lives by the Spirit who hovered over the waters at the beginning of the creation and who overshadowed the Virgin when she consented to be the Mother of the Redeemer, the author of the new creation.

Sickness of the body is itself an effect of original sin and a symbol of the sinfulness of our souls. The sick of Lourdes, with their noble souls smiling bravely through twisted bodies, remind us that we are the people whose company on earth can be tolerated only by God's great mercy and Mary's pity. To the exact extent that the message of Lourdes is ignored, so shall pity perish from the lives of men; and it shall be again, as it was before the Gospel of Christ, that men will be "without affection, without fidelity, without mercy" (Rom. 1:31). Pope Pius XII has impressed on us that one great fruit of the Lourdes centenary should be the renunciation of materialism by our people.



Night prayer of pilgrims of the Society of Pius X in Lourdes.

Lourdes and the Blessed Sacrament

Mary is always showing us Jesus, the blessed fruit of her womb. Catholic devotion to Mary is always a finding of the Child with Mary His Mother. Nowhere is this more true than at Lourdes. The centre of all devotion at Lourdes is the Blessed Eucharist: Mass, Holy Communion, Blessed Sacrament procession, blessing of the sick with the Sacred Host, Real Presence on the altar. Pope St. Pius X wrote in 1911:

The unique glory of the sanctuary of Lourdes lies in the fact that pilgrims from all parts are drawn there by Mary to the adoration of Jesus Christ in the august Sacrament; so that this sanctuary seems to surpass in glory all others in the Catholic world both as the centre of Marian devotion and as the throne of the Eucharistic mystery.

Nowhere is the relationship of Mary to the Blessed Eucharist so clearly grasped as at Lourdes. When the priest says Mass there, especially if he has the privilege of saying Mass at the Grotto, he knows that Mary is there, as she was on Calvary, offering her son. At Lourdes we feel that Jesus is saying to her again: "Woman, these — the sick, the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed, the cancerous, the sinners — these are your children." And Mary is saying to Him again: "Son, they have no health, no strength, no courage, no confidence, no hope." And she is saying to us: "Whatever He shall say to you, do ye."

At Lourdes, as always, Mary is the Servant of the Lord. This, her chosen title, itself marks her as the associate of the Suffering

Servant, our Redeemer. Her association with the Eucharistic Presence at Lourdes is a continuance of this role. It is her Son as sacrificial Victim that she shows to sick and suffering and sinner. A primary feature of Lourdes is the presence of the sick around the Eucharistic Victim. But Our Lord is present among and moves through the sick and suffering, not just as one dispensing words of consolation, but as one who, like themselves, had no beauty nor comeliness, who was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with infirmity, whose appearance was that of a leper, whose body was bruised with infirmity (Isaiah 53). Christ has worn the hidden and despised look of suffering in order that suffering may be able to conform us to His image for ever. Simone Weil said that Christianity does not explain suffering; it uses it. Our Lady of Lourdes points to her Son in our midst as one that serves and has suffered, to show us how we can use suffering or rather offer it to Him to be used with His own. Lacordaire said that "to obtain something on behalf of another, one must become that person's own particular Christ." The sick and those who serve them at Lourdes may be the "particular Christs" of multitudes who are without Christ, without hope and without God in the modern world.

At Lourdes we feel too Mary's association with Holy Communion. Mary's function always is to give us Jesus. The Pseudo-Epiphanius praised Mary for having "given us the Christ, the Heavenly Bread for the remission of sins." At Lourdes we can feel that Mary through the priest gives us Jesus, as once she placed Him in the arms of Simeon; and like Simeon we can say *Nunc Dimitis*. St. Augustine said that the Blessed Eucharist is Bread seeking for hunger: at Lourdes Mary gives us that hunger, she who hungered for the Messiah to be born and who sang at His coming: "He hath filled the hungry with good things" (Luke 1:53).



Lourdes and Prayer

How we are to give glory to God in prayer is surely also one of the things she wishes to teach us at Lourdes. At the first apparition Bernadette tried to make the sign of the Cross to begin her Rosary; she could not do so until the Lady had first made the sign of the Cross on herself. Bernadette made it after her, like her, and the reverence and seriousness with which Bernadette always made the sign of the Cross in imitation of Mary were remarked all her life. At each apparition, Bernadette noted that while she said the Rosary, the Lady passed her beads through her fingers, but her lips did not move, until Bernadette came to the *Gloria Patri*. Then the Lady bowed with exquisite reverence and said the *Gloria Patri* with her. The child imitated her movement, and onlookers declared that they never saw such gracious gestures as those of this poor slum child). The prayer Our Lady of Lourdes asked for by word, and by her own

heavenly example, was the Rosary. What new fervour we could bring to it, if we envisaged Our Lady as following us bead by bead, and joining with us in giving "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost."

At Lourdes, Mary reminds us that she prays with us as well as for us, prays in our place as well as on our behalf. One permissible additional meaning of "Pray for us sinners," is "Pray in place of us who know not how to pray." Mary's prayer is above all glory and praise and reparation to God. It is Magnificat. At Lourdes, in that tremendous gesture with which she spoke her name, she is saying: "See what He who is mighty hath made me; come to Him that He may do great things for you too, being mindful of His mercy." Mary's Magnificat was not spoken for herself alone, but also for the whole people of God: for us. With us, for us, in us, she magnifies the Lord and rejoices in God. St. Ambrose wrote:

Let there be in each of us the soul of Mary, that it may magnify the Lord; let there be in each of us the spirit of Mary, that it may rejoice in God.

Most of the sick who come to Lourdes return home with no change in their clinical condition. But few there are who return home without a complete change in their whole experience of their sickness. If they have persevered in prayer with Mary, they will have been taught by their Mother to say along with her "Yes and Amen" to God's will. Our Lady will have whispered to them, as to Bernadette: "I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next." Mary will have helped them to see reality and life and death through her eyes, the eyes of the Virgin of faith, who looked "not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).



Mary and the Way of Spiritual Childhood

I have left for the end one puzzling aspect of the history of the apparitions, and that is Bernadette's description of the Lady as a "little girl" or a "little young lady," not bigger than herself. Bernadette was aged fourteen at the time, and was small for her age. How is Our Lady's child-like appearance to be explained? Bernanos coined the unfortunate phrase, the Virgin "younger than sin." Commentators on Lourdes have kept repeating and endorsing it since. Some have appealed to such distinctions as Blake's, of innocence from experience and have said that Our Lady of Lourdes is Our Lady before experience, Our Lady before sin. The whole idea is mistaken and unfortunate, as if growing up, or experience, means necessarily a fall from grace; as if innocence were infantilism.

The true explanation of Our Lady of Lourdes child-like appearance is, we suggest, to be found in the Marian teaching of St. Therese of Lisieux. Mary appears as a child because, as a recent study of St. Therese puts it, she "had become, as it were, spiritual childhood personified: 'Behold the handmaid'."

"Behold the handmaid", more exactly, "Behold the slave-girl of the Lord"; here is the spiritual childhood which St. Therese copied and made her own. There is no better commentary on Lourdes than St. Therese's thoughts about Our Lady:

What does me good, when I think of the Holy Family, is to think of their life as quite an ordinary one... Everything in their life was just like our own... For a sermon on Our Lady to bear fruit, it should show her real life, as the Gospel presents it, and not her imaginary life; ... Preachers should say that she lived by faith, as we do; and show this from the Gospels, where we are told that "they understood not what He said to them"; and again, that "His father and mother were wondering at the things that were said about Him." Wonder means a certain astonishment, does it not?... If, on hearing a sermon on Our Lady, we are compelled from beginning to end to say Oh! ... Ah! we are discouraged; and that is not conducive to love and imitation. The unique privilege of the Blessed Virgin is to have been exempt from original sin and to be the Mother of God. But even in the latter respect Jesus has said to us: "He who doth the will of my Father who is in Heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother."

In her poem, "Why I love you Mary", St. Therese calls Mary "the model of the soul who seeks Jesus in the night of faith"; the example for "those who walk in the common way." "I have suffered with you," she ends, "and now I wish only to sit on your

knee and to sing how I love you and to keep telling you for ever that I am your child."

Much of the grace of Lourdes, much of the feeling of a pilgrim before the Grotto, is expressed in these words of St. Therese. Claudel, too, spoke what the pilgrim feels when he visited a shrine of Our Lady at midday and said:

Mother of Jesus Christ, I come for nothing else, but just to look at you. Only to look at you and to cry for happiness, just because you are there and just because I am your son... Just to be with you, Mary, in this place where you are. Not to speak; just to look into your face; just to let my heart say without words what it feels but cannot speak... Because you are all beautiful. Because you are Immaculate, Woman at last restored in grace; the creature of God as it was in its first radiance and will be in its final glory. Because you are Immaculate ineffably, as the Mother of Jesus Christ, who in your arms is the Truth and the only Hope and the sole Fruit... Because I am someone you have looked on lovingly... Because we are here and it is today. Because you are there always; just because you are Mary; just because you exist, Mother of God, I thank you.



Life of St. Bernadette

The remarkable facts of Bernadette's life are readily accessible to all. Her story even arouses interest in those who do not share the Catholic faith. Perhaps it is a natural human instinct to rejoice when the lowly are lifted up to the heights, and especially when a child, neglected and untaught, is chosen for special grace and favour, thus becoming an instrument for good.

Childhood

Bernadette Soubirous was born in Lourdes, France, on the 7th of January 1844. She was the first child of François and Louise Soubirous. At the time of her birth, François was a miller, operating a mill which had belonged to his wife's family. He was a good-natured, easy-going man, with little ability for carrying on a business, and before many years the mill had been forfeited for debt. During most of Bernadette's childhood he was an odd job man, picking up a day's work as opportunity offered, and, from time to time, escaping from his problems and responsibilities by turn-



ing to the delusive comfort of alcohol. His wife and children, naturally, were the chief sufferers from his ineptitude. Louise, whose family was of somewhat better economic status than her husband's, was a hard worker, a warm-hearted neighbour, and exemplary in her observance of Catholic rites. Within a short space of time many children were born to her, only five of whom survived infancy. After Bernadette, there was another girl, Toinette Marie, and three boys. To help feed and clothe them it was often necessary for

their harassed mother to go out to work by the day, doing laundry and other rough tasks for the more prosperous citizens, and, on one occasion at least, helping to harvest a crop of grain. A peasant woman of the region has told of seeing little Bernadette, then about twelve, carrying the youngest baby to Louise in the field, to be nursed during the noon-day rest period. As a child, Bernadette not only did more than might be expected in caring for the smaller children, but helped in their moral and religious training as well.

Bernadette was never strong, and from the age of six she showed symptoms of the respiratory ailment that later became a chronic affliction. It is not clear at this early stage whether she suffered from asthma or tuberculosis, but we know that her mother was anxious about her health and made an effort to provide special food for her. When Bernadette was thirteen she was sent to the neighbouring mountain hamlet of Bartres, to the home of one

Marie Arevant, her foster mother. It was here that Bernadette had been taken for a few months when she was still an infant, to be nursed by Madame Arevant, who had just lost a baby. The woman now had a large family and little Bernadette made herself useful in the house and in the fields. One of her duties was to tend a small flock of sheep that grazed on a hillside nearby; it is this brief phase of her girlhood that has inspired artists to picture her as a shepherdess. Her life was a lonely one, and we get the impression that she was overworked and homesick while she remained in this peasant home. At all events she sent word to her parents that she wished to leave Bartres. One thing seemed especially to disturb her at this time: although she was now fourteen, she had not made her First Communion. Her foster mother had tried half-heartedly to prepare her, but after one or two sessions had impatiently given it up, saying that Bernadette was too dull to learn.

First Communion

When Bernadette went back to Lourdes, she was very happy to be admitted to the day school conducted by the Sisters of Charity and Christian Instruction. This was a teaching and nursing order whose mother-house is at Nevers, in central France. A hospice, a day school, and a boarding school were maintained at Lourdes by these devout nuns who were, as a group, unusually well trained. Thus Bernadette at last began her secular education, and, under Abbé Pomian, continued to prepare for her First Communion. She was also learning a little French, for up to this time she spoke only the local dialect. The nuns discovered that beneath a quiet, modest exterior, Bernadette had a winning personality and a lively sense of humor. This might have been a happy and constructive time for the little girl had it not been for the ever-increasing shadows of poverty at home.

Bernadette imbibed her faith from those around her and was completely familiar with the rosary she carried with her everywhere. Like the general population of the area she had a simple but rugged faith in God. It was typical of her that when she first saw the Lady in the grotto she instinctively pulled out her rosary and began to pray.

The grotto

After moving from one poor location to another, the Soubirous family was now living in a single room of a dilapidated structure in the rue des Petits Fosses; this damp, unwholesome place had once served as a jail and was known as Le Cachot, the Dungeon. Above loomed an ancient fortress, and the narrow cobbled street had once been a part of the moat. The town of Lourdes, itself very old, is situated in one of the most picturesque parts of France, lying in the extreme southwest, near the Spanish frontier, where the Pyrenees mountains rise sharply above the plains. From the crag-



gy, wooded heights, several valleys descend to converge at this site, and the little river Gave rushes through the town, its turbulent current turning the wheels of many mills. There are escarpments of rock in and around Lourdes, the most famous being the Massabielle, a great mound jutting out from the base of a plateau. On the side facing the river it had an arch-shaped opening which led into a sizeable grotto — a grotto that was soon destined to become famous in every part of the world.

Apparitions of Our Lady in Lourdes

It was very cold on the 11st of February 1858, the day that was to mark the beginning of such an extraordinary series of events at the rock of Massabielle. Our Lady appeared to Bernadette eighteen times at the grotto Massabielle.

On a June day in 1858, Fr. Peyramale noticed a girl's head encircled by a halo as he gave her Holy Communion. When she raised her head, he recognised her as Bernadette Soubirous.

At the time of the visions she experienced at Massabielle, Bernadette revealed two sides to her character. Humbly aware of her family's poverty and her own backwardness, she was extremely modest and respectful in her manner. On the other hand she was invariably straightforward, honest and direct when interviewed, never embroidering her accounts. She recoiled in horror when people tried to press money into her hand and was scornful of those urging her to bless their rosaries. 'I don't have a purple stole,' she reminded them. When a visiting Bishop offered to exchange his gold-mounted rosary for hers she thanked him but said quite firmly that she preferred her own.

Under the care of the sisters

The Sisters of Charity of Nevers, who conducted a hospital at Lourdes, offered to care for Bernadette, whose health was greatly

impaired. Her parents acquiesced, and the child left her home to take up her abode with the Sisters. Ostensibly she was at the hospital as an indigent invalid, but in reality she was not subjected to the regime of the sick poor. She had a room apart, bright and healthful, and at table she had a place among the students of the school. Despite all the care lavished on her, she became feebler in health, and was at the point of death, but rallied, and recovered, although she was always ailing.

Innumerable visitors made her life here, from the age of sixteen to twenty-two, a series of receptions. She was always patient, and never refused to see any one. She had, on certain feast days, scarcely time to take her meals. Although she disliked this publicity, she felt that she was an apostle of devotion to Our Lady of Lourdes, and recounted over and over again the details of the apparition.

When the Bishop of Nevers visited the hospital and suggested it was time for her to consider getting married, she replied: "As for that — no way!" When he then proposed entry to a convent she regretted that as well, as always being ill, she was too poor to provide the customary dowry, adding, "Besides, I know nothing and am good for nothing."

Bernadette becomes a nun

In July, 1866, she resolved to become a member of the order of Sisters of Charity. The time arrived for her to bid farewell to the grotto, her family, and the good Sisters, who had cared for her. On the evening of her departure, she repaired to the grotto accompanied by the religious of the hospital. She was very much affected and a torrent of tears poured from her eyes. She prostrated herself on the ground and exclaimed: "O my mother! My mother! How can I leave you!"

The Sisters, witnessing her keen suffering, gently signified that it was time to leave. She asked for another minute. The delay was

granted, but finally the Sisters were obliged to take her by the arms and lead her away. With heroic resolution, she forced back the tears, took a last look at the grotto, and walked quickly towards the town. The Sisters asked her why she was so affected, and if she did not know that the Blessed Virgin was her mother everywhere.

She replied: "O yes, I know it, but at Lourdes the grotto is my Heaven." Her parting with her family was most affecting. On entering her home, she fell fainting into the arms of her mother. She bade each one an affectionate farewell, and then as she heard the carriage wheels rolling up to the door, she tore herself from the arms of her parents, and rushed out, saying several times, "Adieu! Adieu!".

She made a short visit to the hospital to bid goodbye to the Sisters with whom she had lived for six years, and departed, never to see Lourdes again.

As a novitiate of the Sisters of Charity

On the 8th of July 1866, Bernadette entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity, at Nevers. She received the name of Sister Mary Bernard. Except for the first months of her religious life, she suffered almost continually from physical infirmity. She was at death's door at one time during the first year of her novitiate. She received the last sacraments, and the bishop of the diocese, believing that she was dying, granted her permission to make her religious vows. She recovered, and was able to return to the novitiate. She renewed her



vows in solemn profession, in the presence of Monsieur Farcade, the Bishop of Nevers, in the chapel of the mother house of Saint Gildard on the 30th of October 1867. For a short period, she ministered to the sick in the infirmary, but was obliged to relinquish this function of consoling the infirm, which was especially dear to her.

The Superior of the convent entrusted her with the care of the chapel of the community. Here she was engaged in light work which did not tax her strength. In this charge she revealed an aptitude that was not suspected in her. She exhibited an exquisite taste in decorating the altars, and became an adept in the use of the needle. There are preserved in the convent, as relics, specimens of embroidery executed by her, which in design and finish are of superior excellence. Her sufferings from physical debility increased day by day. Asthma, rheumatism, tumours, caries of the bone, haemorrhages, caused intense and agonizing pain.

One day a Sister said to her: "I wonder, Sister, that you do not ask to be cured". "No," she answered, "I am not going to. I am not going to ask for that. Our Lord would say: 'Look at that little nun! She is not willing to suffer anything for Me, Who has suffered so much for her!'"

The perpetual vows

After twelve years of a model religious life, she made perpetual vows on the 22nd of September 1878. A few days after her final and solemn consecration to God, she was obliged to go to the infirmary, where she remained till her death. On the 12th of December she was required to proclaim again, by a last and solemn testimony, the marvels which the Immaculate Virgin had revealed to her at the grotto. Sister Mary Bernard made this last deposition before the representatives of the bishops of Tarbes and Nevers, in the presence of the superior general of the congregation of Nevers and his council. She manifested on this occasion a great joy, which

was not usual for her in similar circumstances. She answered willingly a long series of questions. She repeated in a charming manner, in the sweet language of the Pyrenees, the words which fell from the lips of the Immaculate Virgin of the grotto. More than twenty years after these events, in presence of death and eternity, this holy religious affirmed what she had testified as a child. This was her last testimony of the apparitions of the grotto. She could die now, but death did not come; she must suffer still more. The asthma which had embittered her entire life, tortured her by more frequent and acute attacks. A large tumor enveloped her right knee. Caries ate away the marrow of her bones.

Sufferings and death

The demon attacked her soul, with tortures of conscience, which are like the torments of hell for generous souls who offer themselves as victims for the sins of the world. She had never forgotten Mary's recommendation, in the grotto, to pray for sinners, and to do penance for them.

Holy week came, and with it a share in the sufferings of her Master. "What will do you at Easter?" someone asked her. She answered: "My passion will last till death."



Easter arrived, and with it the joys of the Resurrection, but Sister Mary Bernard was still at Calvary and Gethsemane. On Wednesday of Easter week the devil tempted her violently, as he had tormented God's saints. She was heard to say several times: "Begone Satan!"

She confided to her spiritual director that when she pronounced the name of Jesus all her fears at the devil's attacks disappeared. On Wednesday, of Easter week, she received the Holy Viaticum.

A Sister who attended her said to her: "I will ask our Immaculate Mother to give you consolation."

"No," she replied, "not consolation, but fortitude and patience."

She remembered the special blessing which Pope Pius IX had granted her in advance for the hour of her death. She wished to hold the pontifical document in her hand, and in order to gain the plenary indulgence, she pronounced with fervour the name of Jesus.

A moment afterwards she added: "My God, I love you with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my strength." She repeated in a feeble voice the acts suggested by the prayers for the dying, which were recited by the Sisters. She kissed each of the five wounds of the crucifix which she held firmly in her hands. She made a large sign of the cross, such as she had learned from the Immaculate Virgin at the apparitions in the grotto.

The end was approaching. The Sisters continued to recite prayers. She showed that she was following them. Finally, she murmured twice the second part of the Hail Mary, which she had so often recited joyously at the grotto.

A third time she said: "Holy Mary, Mother of God." She could not finish it. The Sisters, seeing that she was dying, said: "Jesus, Mary, Joseph, assist us in our last agony."

Bernadette bowed her head, and gave up her soul to God. It was three o'clock, the hour in which Christ died on the cross. Mary promised that she would make her happy, not in this world, but in

the next world. The chalice of bitter suffering was offered her, and she drank deeply. Like all of God's faithful servants, she had the cross for her portion. The crown followed. Mary's promise has been realized, and she has long since made Bernadette happy in the Kingdom of her Master.

She died on the 16th of April 1879. She was thirty-five. Her body has not been embalmed or specially treated in any way. Her uncorrupted body is in the convent chapel of the Sisters of Charity in Nevers.

Beatification and canonization

In August of 1913, Pope Pius X conferred on her the title of Venerable. Ten years later Pius XI published a decree on the heroic nature of the virtues of the Venerable Sister Marie-Bernard Soubirous. It stated: "This life can be summed up in three sentences: Bernadette was faithful to her mission, she was humble in glory, she was valiant under trial." The Congregation for Rites examined the authenticity of the ten miracles put forward for her Beatification and selected two — those of Henri Boisselet and Sister Marie-Melanie Meyer.

On the 8th of December 1933, Bernadette was finally canonized by Pope Pius XI with the words: "We define and declare the Blessed Marie-Bernard Soubirous a Saint." Her annual Feast Day is the 16th of April. In France it is celebrated on the 18th of February, the date of the third apparition, when Our Lady first spoke to her.





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